

ACCOUNTING

BEYOND THE NUMBERS



(CLICK THE ABOVE IMAGE TO LISTEN TO THE PODCAST –
PLAYTIME 11:03 – OR, READ THE TRANSCRIPT BELOW)

PODCAST EPISODE #1: THE RBF STORY INTERVIEW WITH JEFF BLEACHER, RBF MANAGING PARTNER TRANSCRIPT

Kae Wagner – Today we have Jeff Bleacher with us from Ross Buehler Falk. Jeff is a CPA, a CGMA and the Managing Partner at Ross Buehler Falk, so welcome, Jeff.

Jeff Bleacher – Great to be here. Looking forward to it.

Kae Wagner – We’re going to introduce Jeff by the numbers. Jeff has three children, right?

Jeff Bleacher – Yes, I do. Two sons and a daughter.

Kae Wagner – And you are married to Cindy for how many years?

Jeff Bleacher – Twenty-seven years.

Kae Wagner – And you’ve been at RBF for 30+ years?

Jeff Bleacher – Thirty-two years since day one in 1985.

Kae Wagner – Awesome. What many people probably don’t know about you is that you have attended 11 Springsteen concerts.

Jeff Bleacher – Yes I have. Actually that might be a little bit low. But yes I have. It’s one of my passions.

Kae Wagner – It’s more than 11?

Jeff Bleacher – Yes. It’s probably a couple more; maybe 12 or 13.

Kae Wagner – And zero pets.

Jeff Bleacher – That's correct. Not in our family. Our kids have asked for it but we haven't acquired any.

Kae Wagner – We'll talk about your background. You have a BA from Elizabethtown College and lots of professional and community involvement. We won't go through all the details on that, but you are very much a community person, right?

Jeff Bleacher – Yes I am. I think it's important to support the community where you work, have your business and your clients. We as a firm, our whole firm, that's actually very important to us and we as a firm are committed to community service.

Kae Wagner – Everyone appreciates that I know.

Kae Wagner – Let's start off with the RBF story. When you present the story, lots of times in your conversation about RBF, Jeff, you talk about going "beyond the numbers." Tell us how the firm got started.

Jeff Bleacher – The firm started 32 years ago in January of 1985 when Jack Ross and Fred Buehler wanted to have a different firm in the marketplace, to try to be different from their competition. I guess in 1985 branding was important. So they went out and started a practice. Ken Falk became a partner later. The original two, Jack and Fred, were great mentors to me over my 32 years. I've been with the firm since day one. They're now retired. But through the years they were great mentors to me over a long period of time.

Kae Wagner – When did you become Managing Partner?

Jeff Bleacher – I became Managing Partner in 2009. I became a Partner in 1995.

Kae Wagner – You've been a very integrated and integral part of the firm in its growth over the years.

Jeff Bleacher – Yes, but it's not just me. We have a really great team and other Partners and so it's really a team effort. It's not just one person. We're more like a soccer team, as a team of people, not a team based on stars.

Kae Wagner – I like that philosophy. As you look back over the past 32 years what are some of the changes that you've seen over the years?

Jeff Bleacher – Well, internally, as I mentioned, the two original Founding Partners retired and we've actually had another Partner come on board after that who's also retired. So we've been through three successions and I think that's really important because that's one of the areas that we help our clients with: succession. In today's market, there's a number of businesses and small businesses going through succession and generational changes, so we've got a lot of experience with that. We're able to really put that expertise to our clients, so we continue to see more of that moving forward. The other thing is technology. Technology has changed our industry dramatically and allows us to be more efficient so that we can focus more on the client's strategy, focus on higher level areas, tax planning and so forth, rather than just crunching the numbers. The term you use is beyond the numbers. Also it's better

communication, and we use social media as a platform to communicate with our clients. Again it's really helped with the client experience in that through secure portals, because cybersecurity is important, we're able to transfer information to clients quickly, efficiently, and securely. The thing that's really also changed is that the clients are more sophisticated today and they really expect more from their outside CPA. That's where it's important to be business strategist with your clients and go beyond the numbers. Jack Ross was very well known in the community for that. We had a natural start in that area and we've continued through the years. Jack helped many well-known businesses in the community, many of which are still clients of the firm. That's been a natural progression for us. But we have to provide more to our clients, not just traditional accounting services.

Kae Wagner – When we talk about accounting services, Jeff, what are the services or the range of services that you offer to your clients?

Jeff Bleacher – We provide the basic or the normal or expected services from a CPA firm: tax return preparation, tax return planning, financial statement preparation for verification for your financial statements to a third party, say a bank, such as audits, financial reviews, audit reviews compilations and also some management services; management consulting services, help with QuickBooks, the traditional areas that you would see in a CPA firm. But really again, we feel it's maybe a little bit of a cliché, but we feel we need to be Trusted Advisors to our clients, and they really expect us to be that, to be that consultant. We really try to support them strategically. We have built alliances through the years to help clients, whether it's research and development tax credits, cost segregation studies, wealth management, accounting software, human resources, and a variety of other areas to be the overall advisor for our clients and help them strategically grow their business.

Kae Wagner – When you use the phrase beyond the numbers, is that what you're talking about? Those kinds of relationships with clients where it's not just about a provided service, but goes beyond the numbers into a relationship?

Jeff Bleacher – Absolutely. We think it's very important. It's the relationship with a client that is important; a relationship with people. We get to know our clients. We get to know their industries. We get to know their families. We really get to understand their business. That way we can help them grow their business. It's one thing to have a company that's \$5 million in sales to take it to get to \$10 million. It takes something completely different. We can help them through our internal resources or external resources to help them grow their business. So really it is about relationships. One of the things our clients have commented on, we've done surveys of our clients and focus groups, and they say we're very accessible at the Partner level and that's really important because we need to understand their business to really help them grow.

Kae Wagner – When clients would be looking to partner with you or to come on with RBF as clients, the expectations that they would have, what they could expect from you, in a nutshell, how would you characterize that?

Jeff Bleacher – Really, it gets back to our people and it gets back to that personal relationship. Internally we have a culture of learning. It's really one of our core values so that all of our people are really pushed to learn specific knowledge in the certain industry, develop soft skills for those relationships. As I mentioned earlier, technology is very important. We have many years of experience. Many of our Partners and Team Members have a lot of experience and a lot of expertise. We've helped

with complex deals whether it's mergers and acquisitions, financing, succession planning, many of the challenges with small and family businesses. In fact, we have an individual, one of our Partners, who was in industry, so he's been, as I'll say, on the other side of the desk. He has that expertise to know what it's like to be in their shoes. Really we want to be their partner. We want to help them grow their business. What they also find is that we really listen to our clients: what they want, what they expect, and they do want educational opportunities from us, so we do provide seminars. We do contact marketing which is not just all your traditional accounting, but its own business; areas such as business development, strategic planning, processes, procedures. In addition to that we have an Executive Forum where we have local leaders come in and talk about their business lessons learned over the years. How they grew their successful businesses and share their ideas with the community. Providing learning experiences, again, through seminars and whether it's technical or not technical, but really, really pass that knowledge on to our clients.

Kae Wagner – It sounds to me for all those who are listening, that if you're looking for an accounting firm that really truly goes beyond the numbers, a firm that has deep relationships, and I've seen you and all of your Partners interacting with your clients, and there seems to be such a depth in the relationships that you guys have forged over the years. Anyone who would look to engage you and your Partners would be well-served in standard accounting, but also much deeper than that.

Jeff Bleacher – It is. We really want to provide that value to help businesses understand their numbers, use their numbers to help them grow, and educate them, one of the important aspects of business, help with its dashboards, or day-to-day operations and really help them, be their Partner in their success.

Kae Wagner – Jeff thank you so much for your time, for your insight and I look forward to speaking with you again.

Jeff Bleacher – Thank you, Kae. I appreciate the opportunity.